

## Title slide:

**[SLIDE 2]:** In January 2024, ITV broadcast a rather unusual drama – a one-off four-part dramatization of what has been characterised as the greatest miscarriage of justice in modern British history. In a multichannel age, this was a high-risk venture - even when supported by shrewd holiday scheduling and ubiquitous marketing but the punt paid off: within a week of the first episode's release ITV was able to declare it their most successful new drama, since the inflated highs of lockdown. Its impact on the public psyche, the press and the political life of the country over the month that followed, however, was beyond anything its creators had foreseen. Hailed in the Guardian as 'state of the nation TV', it seems set to follow in the hallowed footsteps of 'Cathy Come Home' (**BBC, 1966**) as a text that both provokes and defines a moment of national consciousness.

**[SLIDE 3]:** *Mr Bates vs. The Post Office* can be regarded as a 'state-of-the-nation' text from three perspectives.

- It made a direct intervention in the 'national conversation' and political agenda
- It brought together the British viewing public an imagined community.
- It offered an allegory for the nation at a level beyond its immediate concerns.

And it combines a level of social conservatism with political critique

**[SLIDE 4]:** A bit of Background: Between 1999 and 2015 over 900 postmasters and post mistresses in UK post offices were convicted of theft, fraud and false accounting based on data provided by Horizon, a newly commissioned and, as it turned out, faulty IT system, while others, though not convicted, lost their businesses and were required to cover shortfalls invented by the IT system. Most of those involved sustained substantial financial losses as well as damaged reputations, leading to debt, many bankruptcies, widespread stress-related ill health and at least 4 suicides.

Despite the best efforts of PO to suppress it, the story did gain considerable press coverage over the years, beginning with Computer weekly in 2008, with Private eye and culminating in BBC's panorama programme in 2022, however public engagement remained limited and various, and variously unsatisfactory, iterations of mediation and compensation schemes continued to drag on right until up to the new year broadcast of the miniseries.

**[SLIDE 5]:** The show, took the domestic ratings, the national discourse and the UK government by storm. Finally this rather technical story of small businesses in trouble found a human angle that met with national response, response so strong laws were changed almost overnight and pressure to bring to book those responsible became irresistible.

**[SLIDE 6]:** This state of the nation drama made a direct intervention in national conversation and national political sphere. Turned an obscure and rather boring long running legal tussle into a cause celebre. It's message to the UK gov could be summarised as– the nation is in a state and must be fixed. One might argue that the nation has troubles everywhere you look, with more social injustice in evidence than we've seen for decades – but this is one issue that can actually be fixed – is in power of UK gov to fix. A mercifully non-partisan cause which allowed a struggling flailing government to align itself on the side of 'the people' – and garner a bit of positive press..

**[SLIDE 7:]** The show was able to raise its subject matter to this level of political urgency because it activated the empathic imagination of a national audience (and its political and press representatives). It provided a focus for a version of Anderson's imagined community' – specifically a 'British public' outraged by the abuse of power within their institutions. Such imagined communities are generally formed in opposition to something or someone - the existence of a 'them' being a required condition in order to define the 'us' of the community in question. While this is a role more usually fulfilled by other nations, or ethnically defined outsiders, here it is a case of enemies within the heart of the British establishment.

So according to this construction: In the hero's corner: 'the people' - respectable , lower middle class, 'small business owners' (second only to 'working families' in the political lexicon of deserving citizens). These are, people moreover faced with un-payable debts and financial ruin including the loss of their homes – the fear of which many share during a much debated 'cost of living' crisis. They are. also people rendered helpless in the face of a kafka-esque bureaucracy – again likely to be met with sympathy by members of a frustrated British Public.

In the villains corner – powerful and apparently unaccountable, institutions / organisations. From Windrush to the Manchester bombing, to Grenfell to the ongoing Blood scandal, we've had a lot of these in the news recently. All accompanied by apparent lack of accountability by those responsible while those impacted must pay the price. – leading to diminishing faith in institutions that do not seem to be operating in the interests of the tax-payer they notionally serve. And, in an important supporting role, we have Big Tech and specifically AI in the form of Fujitsu's Horizon - apparently the book-keepers answer to Skynet (with the ominous, red flashing light on the terminal under the desk signalling kindred with the nightmarish terminators of that much-memed franchise)

Clearly the shows' ability to muster engagement and support around this narrative is notable in contrast, for example, with *Sitting in Limbo*, which dramatised the impact of the Windrush scandal. I'd argue this is due to the way Mr Bates appealed to a very particular, conservative idea of Britain.

**[SLIDE 8]:** Imagery and structures expressed a tension between two aspects of the nation: on the one hand national institutions, represented by the urban steel and glass of (mechanised) bureaucracy, together with the imposing, intimidating buildings and protocols of traditional power structures; on the other hand the people, framed largely against William Blake's 'green and pleasant land'– albeit most of that greenery is actually in Wales rather than the England of the hymn.

**[SLIDE 9]:** Popular reception of the show was overwhelmingly positive. Reviews by Media critics were more mixed, however, with the independent review after the opening night suggesting that the creators were focused '**too much on the story and too little on the telling**' resulting in an '**earnest and well- intentioned**' drama dragged down by excessive exposition. The reviewer considered the Post Office a '**slippery, unsatisfying villain**' and doubted the shows ability to maintain its overnight audience of 4 million for its 4 night run

**Getting into the nuts and bolts of the Horizon system, spelling out for audiences exactly what happened, isn't conducive to dramatic programming. It is hard to imagine many will stick with *Mr Bates vs the Post Office* for the full duration of its four-night run.**

They called it wrong on all counts

The error was based on three false assumptions. **The first being that the British viewing public** already had a handle on the tortuous ins and outs of the case – arguably it was precisely by not over-estimating us in this respect that it garnered support.

**Secondly they misunderstood what a TV drama of this kind is ‘for’.** Helen Piper has argued that the attempt to identify a universal aesthetic value in television is misguided and that the social and community building functions served by national broadcast television are fundamental qualities not to be dismissed. This, I’d argue, is supported by online audience reviews which focus on the subject matter of the story as much as they do on the telling – and frequently conflate the two.

**Thirdly I’d suggest that this reviewer overlooked the extent to which, just because a drama does not advertise its own cleverness,** doesn’t mean not actually cleverly made. *Mr Bates v the Post Office* has more in common with the legacy of social realism we find in UK soaps than with the narrative tours-de-force of what Jason Mittell calls ‘quality TV. Certainly it appears to privilege substance over style - in sharp contrast with such innovative offerings as *Peaky Blinders* or *Bridgeton*. But representational strategies and storytelling technique are not absent from *Mr Bates versus the Post Office* – just rendered without obvious recourse to virtuoso artistry.

**[SLIDE 10]:** Beyond dramatizing the issue, the show dramatized Britishness and provided an allegory for the concurrent feelings of belonging and alienation experienced by many British subjects. - and I’d suggest that, notwithstanding a Napoleonic view of Britain as a ‘nation of shopkeepers’, this is what caught the public imagination.

It pits the nation as defined from above with the nation as defined from below. Scholars often draw a distinction between the nation as represented by its institutions and formal symbols and the nation as represented by its citizens in their day to day existence.

Angeliki Koukoputsaki-Monnier, for example, contrasts the materiality of everyday practices with symbolic patterns and institutions. Michael Skey meanwhile articulates the importance of national identity using a similar division between the practical benefits of being classified

as a citizen of an established, democratic nation-state and the pervading nature of everyday language, habits and social organisation that underpin an ongoing sense of place and identity

**[SLIDE 11]:** The imagery employed by the drama emphasises the contrast and conflict between these two different ideas of nation at every turn. What the Guardian called the 'multiheaded Goliath' of the story consists of national institutions represented by the urban steel and glass of (mechanised) bureaucracy,

**[SLIDE 12]:** with particular emphasis with a corporately branded Post Office.....

**[SLIDE 13]:** together with the imposing, intimidating buildings and protocols of traditional power structures – their grand scale, aided by pointed shot composition and angle,, rendering ordinary people small, insignificant.

**[SLIDE 14]:** London skyline is invariably a harbinger of trouble . the capital itself an alien world to our heroes – **[click]** though notably not to the solicitor who becomes their champion - here framed by glass and steel.

**[SLIDE 15]:** And speaking of aliens, of course the supporting villain Fujitsu is represented by more steel and glass, Sci-Fi -level high security, which the visiting post office union rep comments on – and of course ominous cut-aways to the glowing light on the terminal as hapless and increasingly distressed postmasters and post mistresses fail to match its ability to cook their books.

**[SLIDE 16/ video clip]:** When this alien world intrudes into the small rural villages that apparently make up the rest of the UK, its in the person of real life Men in Black, the dreaded post office investigators, complete with convoy of black limos. These alien and alienating characters are seen to be impervious to reason, or indeed humanity – and their appearance is accompanied by ominous sound effects borrowed from the Terminator and used – in countless modern thrillers, although so subtle here you might not consciously notice it..... **[play video]** (Godzilla)

**[SLIDE 17]:** Ranged against this powerful, metropolitan monster, this multi headed Goliath, we have 'the people', characterised by friendly villagers, home-baking and led by a salt-of-the-earth DIY hero - - framed largely against a backdrop of a bucolic grandeur.

**[SLIDE 18]:** while the Post Office we encounter in the capital, and through its agents the investigators, is corporate and inhuman, the local post office businesses are presented less as a profit making proposition than a way of life and service to the community - thus in Alans post office we saw his partner advising a customer on knitting yarn, while Jo (who runs the idyllic little village shop picture here) keeps the pensions books of her dotted old ladies in her drawer so they don't lose them. Noel Thomas (also pictured) has been a postman all his life, taking on his local post office almost as an obligation to his community and for Sam (who we later meet in Walsall) its also as calling as much as a job. Local Post offices are seen as part of the life of the community – signifiers, along with the familiar red post boxes, of the British homeland.

**[SLIDE 19]:** The postmasters and postmistresses are shown living and working – and fighting their battles - from small, crowded domestic spaces– complete with low ceilings and messy kitchen tables , where their paper work competes for space with coffee cups and kids detritus. These are very sharply contrasted with the vast, sanitised work spaces we see in the city.

**[SLIDE 20]:** Indeed in some cases these small spaces come to signify imprisonment (real or metaphorical) in a nightmare from which there is no escape.

**[SLIDE 21]:** But the landscape helps raise up our heroes – they are not without dignity. Like the national TV described by Piper, the drama juxtaposes the breathtaking with ordinary, drawing a close connection between them.

**[SLIDE 22]:** it is notable that we encounter no London Post offices. The 'towns like this' as Piper calls them, that blend the local with the national in *Mr Bates* draw heavily on the 'green and pleasant' characterisation that aligns them against the metropolis **[click]** – the first two we encounter are Alans shop by the sea and Jo's on her cosy Hampshire village green – but even Walsall, Elmsmere and Bridlington are introduced with shots that amplify whatever greenery is available.

**[SLIDE 23]:** It is worth noting, by the way, that a certain amount of poetic license has been taken even with the more rural settings: Alan Bates own house is not in fact a detached retreat in the middle of nowhere but part of a small terrace.... **[click]** And given that he lives

in Wales, not on the Costa del Sol, it is difficult to imagine anyone taking quite so many phone calls outside – but it does make for fantastic framing to contrast with the urban opposition....

**[SLIDE 24]:** A similar level of contrast is provided by the various other sets and traditions associated with the postmasters campaign. Meetings over a beer in the garden of a country pub – and in that bastion of rural British life: a village hall – complete in later scenes with the backcloth for a village play – which, you will notice, features more green and pleasant land...

**[SLIDE 25]:** A sense of homeliness and DIY continues to pervade the campaign activities, even as the team become quite proficient and legally savvy, with home baking providing a particularly notable thematic thread. Not only in the constant appearance of cakes and sandwiches, but in the considerable amount of dialogue devoted to discussing them – from scenes setting up Jo's country enterprise where she bakes for her shop, **[click]** to those of her feeding her local MP with cake, **[click x 3]** to the increasingly complex catering required for the growing numbers attending the meetings in the village hall.

**[SLIDE 26]:** Juxtaposition of imagery representing these two 'nations' structures the narrative – and underlying structure of feeling (as Raymond Williams called it' )

Skey discusses the 'logic of nationalist thinking' underlying unspoken assumptions. For Britain, and certainly the Britain of the Daily Mail (which, I would argue, is the main target audience) these unspoken assumptions include faith in British institutions (which Piper notes is closely linked, in British media, to public estimations of the state of the nation) . Hence the extremity of the peoples' scandalised reaction when these institutions fail - the unspoken logic here is that this is Britain, not some corrupt failed state. Not the USA – of which we expect domination by greed and corporate over-reach. We trust our institutions. For all the limitations of this shows construction of Britishness,

The battle that reaches its culmination in a courtroom drama, then is in many ways a battle for the soul of the nation.

**[SLIDE 27]:** A post script: and a sobering thought:

Helen Piper discusses the need to frame the cultural value of texts within a '**broader context of fragile collective belonging, and a volatile, convergent national broadcasting structure**'

There has been no time to discuss the latter here, but it is clearly pertinent. I would suggest this drama and its genesis illustrates the continued importance of national television in an increasingly global media landscape – not only for fostering a rooted sense of national community, but also for airing locally important issues for a local audience.

**[SLIDE 28]:** However ITV lost around £1m on this show, even with its prestigious cast taking well below market rates. Apparently the BBC has dramas in the pipeline addressing Grenfell and the Blood scandal... but of course they have challenges of their own with the license fee increasingly contested..... So how sustainable is this sort of committed, campaigning drama? Or indeed any television output that addresses the state of the nation....

**[SLIDE 29]:** Thanks / Questions